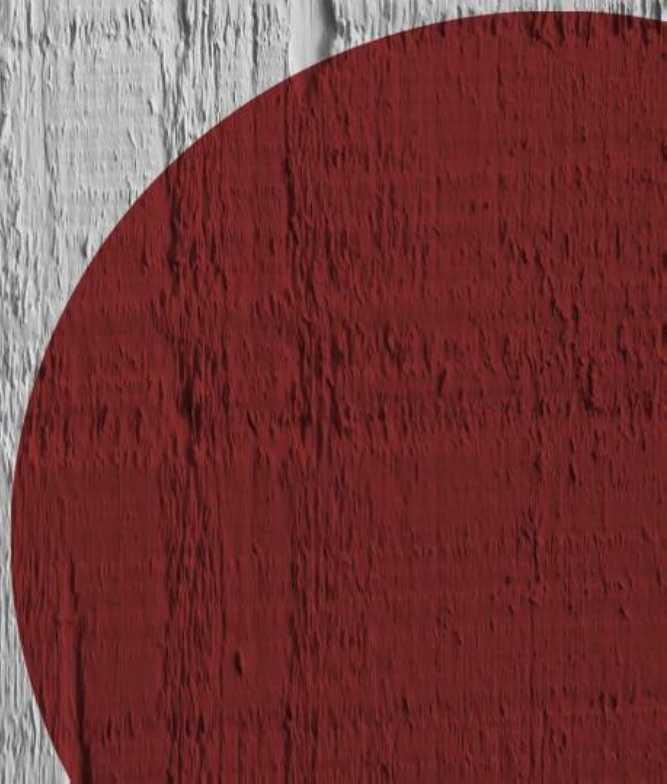


HELLO, BROTHER

A STORY BY BROOKS KOHLER



In 1861, the state of Kentucky declared itself neutral on the decision of whether or not to join the Civil War. Although the state took no official position, many men left home to support the side of their choosing. In the following story, two brothers return home after the war and are forced to deal with the decisions they made.

BEGIN STORY

It was a hot, August afternoon. From behind his plow, Thomas Boyd noticed a figure ripening on the horizon. Bringing the mule to a halt, he stood as somber as a statue. In the distance, a large cloud plumed up, causing the orange hue of the sunset to gradually fade into the gray of the cloud. Farther out, the low rumble of thunder could be heard echoing from the valley to the south. The approaching storm had been introduced by a mugginess which mixed with the dry soil of the Kentucky hills and permeated the nostrils with the smell of damp earth. Pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, he wiped his brow. Clearing his eyes from the sweat, Thomas squinted hard to see who it was before him.

“Who are ya?” he shouted from his station.

“It’s me, Pa. Luke!”

Stunned by what he had heard, he let go of the plow and ran to the boy. Taking him firmly by

the neck, he squeezed him tightly.

"I can't believe you're home, Son!" he exclaimed.

"Me neither, Pa."

"Let me get a look at ya!"

Thomas released his grasp, held his son by the shoulders, and stood back. The innocence that he remembered before his son's leaving was now gone. The sparkle in the greenest eyes plucked from heaven had dimmed and was replaced by a hardened gaze. Wisely, he did not press the issue or inquire as to what the boy had witnessed. Instead, being a wise father, he merely smiled, finding it easier to accept what had happened instead of trying to understand it. Returning to the plow, Thomas took the mule by the reins and started to lead the animal out of the field.

"How's Ma?" asked Luke, taking a small pipe from the tattered bag he had draped across his shoulder.

"Oh, she's fine. Ever since you and your older brother left, she's kept herself busy doing some of the oddest things I've ever seen a woman do. She even made me this here wallet out of an old piece of rabbit hide." Removing the object from his pocket, he handed it to his boy.

"Hey, that's a nice one, Pa!"

"I know. Your momma has good taste. Walk with me, Son, while I take Ole Sue back to the barn,

and we'll go see how your ma's gettin' along."

As they sauntered, a lightning bolt came crashing to the ground behind them. Ole Sue jumped, but soon settled down.

"It's gonna be a hard rain," commented Thomas, looking behind him at the cloud.

"Yeah, I reckon so," added Luke.

Catching a whiff of the smoke from Luke's pipe, Thomas stared at the object with contempt.

"That's a bad habit," he said. "Folks around here get the ache in their lungs from that stuff. The doc over at Paducah comes around now and then. He says it's not caused by that, but I know better than to believe an old quack."

"I know, Pa, but them boys from Virginia... Well, they was kind of fond of it. And since I was there along with 'em, well..." He paused, allowing his voice to trail off until it finally turned to a low, grunted laugh. "Let's just say, Pa, we don't need to go into that."

Reaching the house, Thomas led the mule to the barn while Luke polished his appearance. Retrieving a tiny comb from the bag he was carrying, he rubbed a little spit through his hair in the hopes that it would lay. For several minutes, he groomed himself in earnest, combing one side of his hair and then moving to the next, until finally he was satisfied. Then, placing the comb back into the bag, he took the doorknob with his left hand. In doing so, a surge of emotion came over him. *I'm*

really home, he thought, and it almost knocked him off his feet.

However, the moment was short-lived. From behind him, he heard a voice of familiarity. He let go of the knob and turned around. Coming toward the house were two men, his father and another of the same blood, but in seeing the latter, an overpowering resentment took hold of Luke's heart.

The two men were nearly at the door when the second one stopped. He peered up at Luke and shook his head before saying, "Hello Brother." Stunned, Luke slid the bag off his shoulder. When it hit, eight hundred miles of miscellaneous junk clattered.

"Hello, Nate." replied Luke.

"It's been a long time, Brother."

"Yessum, I guess it has."

Thomas licked his bottom lip, something he always did when he was nervous. Before the war, he had seen his two sons go from fists to cuffs on several occasions, and he didn't want to see it again, especially now that the war was over.

"Boys, boys," he intervened, stepping in between the two of them. "Let's not have this!"

"Have what, Pa?" asked Nate, smirking as he continued to bead his eyes on Luke's face.

"Let's not have any fightin', not today and not tomorrow!"

"Aw, shoot, Pa," grinned Luke. "Me and Nate

ain't gonna fight. Are we, Yank? I mean, Nate."

Nate started to move forward, but Thomas stopped him. "Luke!" he shouted. "You come down off that porch and go out back to the pump! Nate, you go inside and tell your mamma that your brother's home and needin' some food." But both brothers continued to look at each other in anticipation. "I said, 'Get!'" ordered Thomas. "I will not have this! I will not! If you two boys want to..."

"For goodness' sake, Thomas Randolph Boyd!" said a voice, cutting him off mid-sentence. "The way you're carrying on! You'd think George Hendershaw's cattle had broken down the fence again. Come here, Son. Give me a hug."

Taken by surprise, Luke turned. She took him by the neck and pulled him down toward her, but being modest, he was reluctant. "Get down here!" she exclaimed, jokingly. "You may have outgrown your breeches, but you've not outgrown your mamma." Squeezing him tightly, her eyes filled with tears. "It's good to have you home, Son." she said, holding him firmly in her arms.

"It's good to be home, Ma," he replied. While she was holding him, a foul smell came to her attention. Backing up from him, she stared at the uniform. "Take it off, Luke." Her tone was as cold as an autumn wind.

"What?" he asked, not sure of what she was meaning.

“Take it off. *Take it off!* See those stains, Thomas?” she screamed, pointing to her son’s stomach. “That’s blood! The blood of some poor mother’s son.”

Immediately, she covered her face and ran into the house. “Elizabeth!” shouted Thomas, calling out to her.

A sullen look came upon Luke. He stomped down off the porch and walked to the back of the home. Thomas ran into the house, leaving Nate standing alone in the yard.

Curious, Nate followed Luke to the old pump in the backyard. By now, the storm was close enough that little doubt could be given on how strong it would be. Lightning bolts were beginning to fill the sky, and with the wind came the sound of snapping branches and singing trees.

“She don’t understand, Luke,” said Nate, taking a seat on the ground. “She’s not used to such things.”

Without a word added to the conversation, Luke undressed. Nate stood up and dusted off his bottom.

“Well, you best hurry up,” he said, yawning. “Ma will have dinner on soon, and from the looks of those clouds, you ain’t got a whole lot of time before you won’t need that ole pump.”

As Nate walked away, Luke lifted his head. “How we gonna do this, Nate?”

The other brother paused, letting out a deep

sigh. "I don't know, Luke."

The next several weeks passed without incident. August gave way to October, cooler temperatures started to greet the hills, and much of the time spent was working in preparation for the winter months. For Thomas, the extra help was a blessing, but for the Elizabeth, the war was hardly over. From her kitchen window she watched daily as the brothers made their way to and from the barn, smiles on their faces one minute, and looks of discontent the next. At night she went to bed early, only to find herself rising in the morning in order to pray. And, pray she did.

During the war, she had adopted a plan for praying, something she read about in the newspaper. The goal was to devote one full hour of prayer each day to the effort. This was achieved by breaking the day into segments: fifteen minutes for thanks, fifteen minutes for grace, fifteen minutes for courage, and, finally, fifteen minutes for safety or devotion towards her family. So, as the day progressed, she would take breaks to partake in prayer, but now, that was no longer enough.

With her Bible pressed firmly against her chest, she would take her place in the old rocking chair next to the stove. After checking the fire, she would close her eyes and relax, dutifully repeating Psalm 5:3 which read, *"My voice You shall hear in the morning, O Lord; in the morning I will direct it to You, and I will look up."*

One bone chilling morning, when the frost had glazed the farm in a white sheen of crystals, Thomas woke to find his wife asleep in the old rocking chair.

“Elizabeth?” he asked, gently nudging her. “Elizzzzzaaabeth?”

Startled, she jerked back. The Bible in her lap fell to the floor. Thomas reached down and picked it up.

“I see you’ve been readin’,” he said, handing the book back to her.

“What time is it?” she asked, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

“Five.”

“Five o’clock!” she exclaimed, “Well, I’ve got to get going.” Before she could attempt to rise, Thomas placed his hand on her knee.

“What is it, Ma?” he asked, with a devotion that only his love could foster. She smiled; then her eyes began to water. Reaching for her hand, Thomas crouched down and braced himself as if he were proposing all over again. “What is it, Lizzy?” he asked again, this time his tone shifting into the mesmerizing quality that stole her heart so many years ago.

“I know I can’t hide it from you, Tom,” she whimpered.

“What?”

“Every day, I watch our boys come and go, as

if nothing had happened. Yet, I can feel them suffering.”

As she talked, she felt the grasp of his hand tighten. Touching his cheek with her other hand, she looked him deep in the eyes.

“You’re a good man, Thomas. You are a good, father, and I know you see it, too.”

Like a scolded child, he lowered his head. Dropping his head into her lap, he began to sob. Out of twenty-two years of marriage she had seen him cry only once, and with his tears she, succumbed.

Luke pulled back the flannel curtain hanging on the window next to his bed.

“Hey, Nate,” he said, boastfully, trying to whisper.

“What?” replied Nate, in a disgusted voice.

“Look out the window. I ain’t seen a frost like that since when I was in Georgia!”

“I’m proud for ya. Now go back to sleep.”

Not satisfied with the answer he received, Luke shimmied the covers off his legs and moved over to Nate’s side of the bed. Feeling him climbing into the bed with him, Nate pulled the covers tightly around himself.

“Come on, Luke. Get out!” he shouted, hitting him in the leg.

“Hey, Brother, I was thinkin’.”

“That’s a first,” said Nate, his head now buried beneath his pillow.

“I was thinkin’ we oughta get the rifles out and go do a little squirrel huntin’!”

Only a few seconds had passed before Nate’s head emerged from the pillow.

“Where?” he asked.

“Down across the hill. Back in the valley. Remember there used to be a whole mess of ’em back there?”

“What time do ya want to go?”

“How about this afternoon?”

“What’s Pa got us doin’ today?”

“Same as usual.”

Nate looked off in a moment of contemplation and then returned to the anticipation on Luke’s face.

“Okay then. Four o’clock it is.”

“Yee ha!” shouted Luke, jumping up from the bed. “We’re a-goin’ huntin! Yeee haaaa!”

Nate smiled, and for the first time since he had been home, he felt something was right.

Later that afternoon, Luke and Nate walked out onto the porch with their rifles in hand.

“Where you boys off to?” asked Thomas. “We just got back from the field, and you ain’t had any supper.”

“We’re gonna go do a little huntin’, Pa, back in the valley,” replied Nate. “We’ll eat supper later.”

“Huntin’? What kind?”

“Squirrels!” added Luke.

“Squirrels? Well, there should be a mess of ‘em back up in there.” commented Thomas. “It’s that time of year.”

Patting them on the back, he bid them good luck and watched them until he could make out their figures no longer.

“Where are the boys?” asked Elizabeth.

Thomas turned around to see her holding a bundle of rags.

“I didn’t know you were there,” he said.

“I was out back,” she replied. “Where are they?”

“Huntin’.”

“Hunting? Oh, Thomas, how in the world could you let them go do that?”

“What’s wrong with a little huntin’? It’ll be good for ‘em. Like old times.”

Immediately, she dropped the rags and ran to the kitchen to get her Bible.

“For goodness’ sake, Elizabeth,” said Thomas, following her in. “What is wrong with a little huntin’?”

“Nothing, nothing!” she retorted. “Except that you fail to remember what our sons did the last time they held those rifles.

Her words hit him like a brick. His face went flush, and he had to take a seat.

“Surely they’ll be fine, Lizzy. Don’t ya think?”

She didn’t say anything. She didn’t have to. He knew her answer when she took the action of leaving him alone in the room and closing the bedroom door.

Meanwhile, Nate propped his foot upon a rotten stump. Taking a thin piece of leather from his ammo pouch, he placed it between his teeth and bit down. Then, coiling the rifle strap around his forearm, he pulled the gun tight to his chest. With his left arm on the barrel and his eyes fixed on a red squirrel clinging to the side of an oak, he let out a final breath before squeezing the trigger. As the hammer slammed down onto the firing cap, a cloud of smoke smothered his face. Almost immediately he felt the knot in his jaw relax, and sure that he had hit his target, he removed the wet piece of leather from between his teeth.

Standing idle, Luke had watched his brother take the shot from a distance. “Good shot!” he shouted.

Nate acknowledged the approval by nodding and began the meticulous procedure of reloading the rifle. Standing it on its stock, he poured in the powder. Finished, he hoisted the gun back up and walked to the now lifeless creature. Picking it up, he examined it. Proud of his accomplishment, he carried it to Luke.

“What do ya think?” Nate asked, presenting

the squirrel to him.

Postulating over the accuracy of his brother's aim, Luke grinned. "That's pretty good, but see that dangling branch over yonder?"

Nate peered deep into the forest.

"Uh huh."

"Well, hold onto your breeches, boy. I'm goin' to show you somethin' I picked up from ole Johnny Reb."

Fascinated by his confidence but lack of fine tuned procedure, Nate relaxed. "You'll never hit it," he said softly.

Leaning over to spit, Luke smirked, "You just hush and learn."

Lifting the barrel of the gun high into the air, he was, by all standards, far from his mark. But when he released the flame of the cap, a split second later the branch fell to the ground.

"Wooueee!" shouted Luke. "What do ya think about that? Tennessee molasses and chicken fat! Woouoo! Weeeee!"

Surprised, but not discouraged, Nate pushed Luke out of the way, and quickly took aim on a distant stump. With the recoil of the rifle, the side of the stump evaporated into a thousand fragments.

"Aw, shoot, Yank! We got it goin' on now," said Luke, smiling from ear to ear.

During Nate's aim, he had already reloaded and vicariously placed his mark on a low hung

grapevine. He fired, and once again, the other brother's mastery of his gun became the test of the other.

Inside, Nate's blood began to boil. Feelings he thought he had suffocated from the war began to fester to the surface. Angrily, he reloaded his gun and fired at any target he could hit. Likewise, Luke did the same until the two brothers had engulfed the woods with a thick, silvery-gray smoke.

Running about frantically, they fired their rifles, cussed, and screamed in victory. Ducking behind fallen logs, they took quick, ill-planned shots, many times missing, but only to show they could. Time escaped them, and before they knew it, the evening sun had disappeared behind the hillside, leaving a dim illumination that was noticeable only by the silhouette of the surrounding trees.

Trying to calm himself down, Nate called out to Luke. "Hey, Reb!" he yelled, jokingly. "What do ya say we call a truce?" He waited, but no sound could be heard. Emerging from behind his cover, he stood up. "Hey! Luke, it's..."

Crack! Before Nate could finish the sentence, a plume of smoke appeared before him like a vision. Forcefully, he was thrown back onto the ground. An eerie quiet fell upon him; his chest began to burn. Out of the silence, he could hear his heart pounding in his right ear. He placed his hand

on his chest and could feel the warm river of blood oozing from him.

Stunned, Luke rose up and rushed to him.

“Nate! Nate!” he screamed. Throwing the rifle down, he ran to his brother’s side. “You’re gonna be okay, Nate. You’re gonna be fine.”

But he wasn’t going to be fine. The brother was already beginning to gasp for air, and with each breath, a wheezing could be heard, pronounced with a low, gurgling sound.

Ripping open Nate’s shirt, Luke examined the wound. It was bad, near the heart, and into the lung. Knowing what this meant, he did all in his power to ease his brother’s suffering. Removing his own coat, he placed it over him.

“You’re gonna be fine, Nate.” said Luke, tucking the coat around him. “I’ll get you back to Ma and Pa’s. They’ll help ya.”

Placing his arms around his brother’s limp body, Luke lifted, but when he did, Nate began to cough violently and a stream of blood seeped from his mouth. Hearing the approaching crackle of death, it was all that Luke could do to stay focused. Easing his dying brother back onto the ground, he resolved himself to stay with him.

“You’re a tough one, Nate. You always were,” he said.

Though he tried, Nate could not speak. A tightening in his chest caused him to heave,

constricting his spine into an arch. Taking Luke by the hand, he prepared himself for what lay beyond the forest. Then, with a final hiss of air from his lungs, his facial expression became as stone, his grip weakened, and all that remained of his life was his eyes, still opened and transfixed on his brother.

An agony of the kind he had never felt penetrated Luke's being. It entered his throat, embedded itself within his heart, and dug deep until it pulled from him the very essence of loss. Fighting it, he pounded his fist against the ground, but it was no use. It was too late. Before he knew it, he was grunting a long, sobering moan that floated amongst the saplings.

Thomas walked out onto the porch. Something wasn't right. He had heard the gunshots earlier but paid them no attention, choosing to calm his wife's nerves over his own concern. Grabbing his rifle, he struck a match to a lantern wick and kissed Elizabeth on the forehead.

"I'll be back shortly," he said, in his most fatherly tone. "I'm sure everything is fine."

Hiking over the hill, he was close to the valley when the silence of the evening was shattered by a single rifle blast. Fearing the worst, he stopped and called out the boys' names.

"Luke! Nate! It's your pa! Come home! It's getting late!"

Thomas hurried along, staggering and

tripping as he did. He was a good distance into the hollow of the valley when the light from his lantern cast a light upon two objects of familiarity. Reaching the boys, he fell to his knees in shock and screamed.

Later that evening, Thomas walked in to find Elizabeth waiting for him.

“Where’s the boys?” she asked.

“Outside,” he said softly.

With a look of satisfaction, she backed up.

“Well, tell them to get in here. I’ve been worried to death. I’ve got supper on for them. I’ve fixed mashed potatoes, a pot of beans, and some...”

“Lizzy,” he said, cutting her off.

“What, Thomas?”

A pause came between them. She saw it in his eyes.

“No! No! No!” she screamed, shaking her head. Running to him, he took her in his arms and held her close to him.

“I’m sorry, Lizzy. I’m sorry.”

THE END

“Hello, Brother” (Originally published in 2003 by *Senior Views*, a magazine based in Anna, Illinois.)

This story is fiction. Similarities to any person living or deceased are coincidence.